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Török, Emőke

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Article

TÖRÖK EMÓKE #

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary

YOUTH IN SPORTS CLUBS: ON THE ROLE OF SPORTS CLUBS IN THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN HUNGARY

Abstract: It is a widely accepted view that the participation of young generations in organized sport activities has positive impact both for the individual and the society. However, these positive impact often does not reach those groups of society, which would need these impacts the most for improving their chances regarding social participation and thus promoting integration of society. The paper presents the results of a survey among young athletes in Hungary, showing that the perception of the athletes in sports clubs is very positive regarding the impact of sport on their lives, but that young people with low-income and low-level of education background have very limited access to sports clubs and so to the positive impact of sport.

Keywords: integration, inclusion, impacts of sports, sports clubs.

Corresponding author: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Reviczky u.4, 1088 Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: torok.emoke@kre.hu

Introduction

It is a widely accepted view in public thinking, among policy-makers, and also among most researchers in sport studies that the large scale participation of young generations in organized sports activities is a desirable objective for the whole society because participation in sports has positive impacts both for the individual and the society as a whole.

It should be noted, however, that there is some disagreement about what exactly these positive impacts consist of. Several researches have attempted to demonstrate, with more or less success, the advantages of regular sports activity. At the same time research results have been contradictory with respect to the assumed positive impacts of sports. Some researches and policy documents stressed, for instance, the positive impacts of sports in preventing certain kinds of deviant behavior (juvenile delinquency, drug abuse and other dependencies) and in decreasing truancy, but some argued that further research would be needed to verify these positive impacts. (Houlihan 2000, Bailey 2005, Földesi, Gál and Dóczi 2010, Rétsági 2015) We are confronted with a similar dilemma regarding the connection between sports on the one hand, and cognitive development and academic achievement on the other hand. Some emphasize the positive impacts of sports on cognitive development (Hills 1998, Talbot 2001), and researches in Hungary have also detected certain connections (Laki and Makszin 1995b), but we can state that the results are not conclusive and further research is necessary in this field as well. (Bailey 2005)

On the other hand, the positive impact of sports on health has been clearly demonstrated; sports activity compensates for the harmful consequences of sedative life style and prevents obesity, and so improves the quality of life. (Vuori et al. 1995, WHO 2010, Gál 2008, Lampek 2015) There is also convincing evidence in favor of the positive influence of sports not only on physical but also as mental health, on psycho-social welfare and on the ability to cope with stress. (Gémes 2008) Some researches, however, have called attention to the fact that professional sports can be harmful to health due to injuries and exhaustion. (Waddington 2000)

It is also widely accepted that regular sports activity conducted in an organized manner promotes the establishment of networks and community. (Alderman 1974, Neulinger 2008, Rétsági 2015) Moreover, it is often assumed that sports – both amateur and professional – influences the development of personality; sports develop and reinforce those personality traits that are advantageous in life outside sports as well: sports exert a positive influence on self-esteem, increases self-confidence and improves cooperative abilities. (Svoboda 1994, Talbot 2001). = In general, it can be stated that the evaluation of sports used to be more optimistic a few decades ago, while more recently the negative impacts of sports on personality formation has been discussed just as much as the possible positive impacts. (Földesi, Gál and Dóczi 2010, Gombocz 2008) The overall picture is that regular sports activity is usually regarded as rather positive,

while researchers are more ambiguous about professional sports, and the possible negative effects of professional sports are more often discussed nowadays. (Waddington 2000)

In spite of the inconclusive character of the results of the researches regarding sports activity, the assumed positive influence of sports is increasingly emphasized in the documents of governments as well as NGOs. Sports are usually regarded in these documents as a point of departure for all kinds of policies ranging from health care and social problems to economic development (Vandermeersch, Vos and Scheerder 2013). The Hungarian Sport XXI. National Sports Strategy 2007-2020 (2007) is one of these typical government documents, which expects the implementation of various and ambitious objectives through the wider public participation in sports. In addition to improving the health conditions and life quality of citizens, the document proposes the realization of the following objective through the wider inclusion of people in sports: „we want to prepare the young generations for the challenges of the accelerated way of living through developing their life management and problem solving skills, we want to contribute to fostering community and family relations, we want to increase the productivity of employment and society, we want to reduce inequality in order to make a contribution to the integration of disadvantaged social groups.” (Sport XXI. 2007:7) This government document not only takes the above mentioned impacts granted, but it also presupposes that sports can contribute to *reducing social inequalities and to improving social integration* through these positive influence. The importance of these objectives is unquestionable in a society where inequality has considerably increased since 1990, the fall of communism (see Ferge 2002), and where researchers have reported serious processes of disintegration (see Kovách 2017), where school performance has been determined by family background to an extreme extent (Róbert 2004, Csapó et al. 2014), and where the proportion of early school leavers have begun to rise², which, in turn, is reproducing that group among the youth which cannot join the labor market and cannot cope with the challenges of knowledge-based society. It is obvious that the positive influence of sports is much needed in such a society. However, the question remains whether those declared ambitious goals are justified or not, and whether sports can indeed contribute to social inclusion.

My study is intended to make a contribution to the problem of whether sports in sport clubs can enhance social integration through *investigating two related questions* on the basis of an empirical research conducted in Budapest. It should be noted that it is not my aim to offer a general or comprehensive account of the role of sports clubs in social integration. The role of sports clubs in general is a very large and complex issue, and to analyze that in full details would exceed the framework of this paper.

The first question is *how inclusive sports clubs are*. With respect to this question I am going to investigate the aspects of socio-economic status and gender³

² According to the data of the Hungarian Statistical Office, 2017, http://www.ksh.hu/thm/2/indi2_2_4.html.

³ The question of the inclusivity of the sports clubs certainly has other aspects, too, such as openness toward people living

in connection with the composition of youth in sports clubs. The more the composition of young athletes in sports clubs corresponds to the general composition of Hungarian youth, the more inclusive and open these sports clubs are, and the more capable they are to play a positive role in the processes of social intergration.

Secondly, sports in the clubs can promote social integration if sports activity helps acquiring skills and abilities, promotes developing personality traits and building networks between young people in a way that facilitates achieving success in their social life also outside sports.

I am going to investigate how the positive impacts of sports appear *in the perception of the youth in sports clubs*, that is, how they themselves view the influence of sports on their life. I am particularly interested in *how they see* the impact of sports on their social connections and on their opportunities outside their sports activity. Since attitudes orientate actions and decisions, their investigation makes an important contribution to the research on the impacts of sports regardless of whether these impacts appear or not in the perception of the athletes.

The two research questions are certainly closely related. Sports can play a positive role in social integration and promote the equality of opportunities only if the positive impacts of sports reach the youth coming from all strata of the society.

The structure of my argument will be the following. First, I need to clarify the concepts applied as well as the relation between sports and integration; then I will present the situation of sports and sports clubs in Hungary in a summary. After that I will proceed to present the results of our research, and finally, I draw the relevant conclusions.

Conceptual framework: integration and inclusion

Integration is a frequently used but quite loosely defined concept of sociology. Without attempting to clarify even the most basic theoretical aspects of this concept, I would argue to distinguish at least two aspects of integration. On the one hand, one can define integration as the state of society where the common norms and values based on the consensus of the great majority cement society as a whole, and which is founded on strong and equal group identities, and where the opportunities offered by society are accessible to each member of society. As opposed to this state of affairs, in a poorly integrated (or disintegrated) society, common norms are weak, common values are uncertain, and the cohesive forces are missing. (Ferge 1990) The gaps between various groups of society are growing, spaces and institutions of segregation are emerging. The concepts of integration and disintegration often refer not only to this state of society, but also to the processes leading to this state. On the other hand, the concept of integration can be applied to the inclusion of certain groups or minorities into social pro-

with disabilities or belonging to ethnic minorities. In Hungary, the situation of the Roma minority would be especially interesting. In this research, however, we did not have data on this issue, further research is needed on this field.

cesses and practices, to the mechanism through which these groups become an integral part of society. When used in this sense, the meaning of integration is very close to that of inclusion.

In this paper integration is understood in the sense that it is a process where people from different social background interact and communicate with each other, and they can act together on the basis of their shared interest and commitment (Witoszynskyj-Moser 2010), and they can experience their belonging to a common group.

Various levels are commonly distinguished within the process of integration. The first level is structural integration where – in the case of sport sociology – the question is whether members of various social groups are present at all and can actually meet within the sports clubs. The next level is social or socio-cultural integration, which refers to the intensive social relations among athletes with various social backgrounds and the adoption of shared norms and values. Finally identification or socio-affective integration is the last level. (Elmose-Østerlund et al. 2017, Witoszynskyj and Moser 2010)

In order for integration to develop in sports and through sports – as a result of which the possibility emerges for those with disadvantaged family background or coming from a vulnerable social groups to take advantage of the opportunities offered by sports – those forms of organization are required which are not only open towards these disadvantaged groups, but actively support the process of disadvantaged young people joining sports activities. In short, inclusive sports clubs are needed.

Inclusive sports clubs are heterogeneous; this means that athletes from various social groups (according to gender, socio-economic status, ethnic group, disability or other group specific characteristics) work together in a sports club to establish the foundation for actual social integration. In the following, I will investigate the inclusive character of sports clubs only in relation to socio-economic status and gender.

On the other hand, a sports club (or a branch of sports) is regarded as exclusive, when it does not enhance the participation of young people with various social backgrounds in the sports activity. Exclusion generally occurs in very simple ways; it can be the case that the venue of a particular sports activity is difficult to access for certain groups, but it is more often the case that membership fees, or the price of required sports equipments are excessively expensive, or the travel costs of participating in competitions can exclude those with disadvantaged social background, thus depriving them of the opportunity – in connection with the positive impacts of sports described above – to improve their situation. Such sports clubs are homogeneous in a social sense; to put it simple, membership in such sports clubs tends to be recruited from middle-class or upper middle class young men belonging to the majority ethnic group, as a consequence of which the ties within the same social group are growing stronger through sports activity. This implies that instead of integration, segregation, the division of various social groups from each other, is being enhanced.

Social inclusion – and of course, exclusion – can be considered as a series of consecutive dimensions (Bailey 2005), where distinguishing the various dimensions helps understand the mechanism of inclusion/ exclusion in sports clubs as well. Among the dimensions proposed by Bailey, three are significant from the standpoint of my research: the spatial, relational and functional dimensions of inclusion. The spatial dimension of social inclusion is about proximity, it decreases economic and social distances, as in bringing together people in a joint activity. In sports clubs the joint sports activity, which is equally important and valuable for all members of the club, brings together the participants with diverging socioeconomic backgrounds. This is however only an opportunity. The relational dimension of social inclusion is about connections and a sense of belonging. Participation in sports clubs or in specific departments of sports clubs creates a very strong sense of belonging; the joint activity, the shared experiences, the shared successes and failures develop strong personal ties. The functional dimension of inclusion is about enhancing knowledge and skills. In case of sports, it means the appropriation (and perfection) of skills and abilities which are regarded as valuable from the standpoint of joint sports activity.

The framework of inclusive sports clubs promotes the equality of opportunities; equal access for young people to opportunities for a better physical and mental state, for relevant skills and competences, for social networking and group experience, all of which are offered by joint sports activities.

In case sports clubs are inclusive in the sense described above, then at least there is the possibility for sports to contribute to the promotion of social integration of disadvantaged groups, and to increase the chances of mobility of those who belong to these social groups.

Sports and the integration of the society

The role of sports in social integration, the relationship between sports and social inclusion/ exclusion, and sports as one of the channels of social mobility: these all have been important issues not only for the sociology of sports, but for public discussion as well. It is a widely held belief that professional sports offer a good opportunity for genuine talents to make a career. Meritocracy is one of the most cherished ideas in Western societies, and the field of sports is usually thought to be meritocratic. It is generally believed that wealth, family background, social network or ethnic identity do not matter on the field where athletes compete; strength, speed, the ability to decide quickly, or in one word, talent will make the winner. Consequently, sports appear as the proper channel through which those in a socially disadvantaged position can make their way up on the social ladder, and achieve, in terms of material and symbolic goods, the status that they deserve on the basis of their accomplishments.

The positive impacts of sports on integration and mobility can be divided into two parts. On the one hand, the social recognition and the material income gained by professional athletes put them directly on a higher socio-economic

status, which also opens up the way to inter-generational and intra-generational upward mobility. (Semyonov and Yuchtman-Yaar 1981) This means that athletes coming from marginalized social groups can join the mainstream part of society, or can even reach, in some cases, an elite position in society. However, such social success can only be achieved by a small segment of athletes in any society. And it may happen even with these successful athletes that the upward mobility ends when their sports career ends, and then it is followed by a downward slide. (Spaaij, Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2015)

There is also another, more indirect kind of impact, - which has been widely discussed for decades in the discourse regarding sports, - which is related to the positive impacts of sports mentioned above. It is often assumed that young people participating in regular sports activity will acquire a wide range of various kinds of human capital – social skills and connections as well as personal competences in addition to physical and mental health –, and this can also facilitate the social integration of those from a socially disadvantaged or marginalized social group and can help them achieve a higher socioeconomic status in their civilian life. It seems, therefore, logical to claim that sports constitute a significant field of social integration.

However, researches in sports sociology have widely debated these impacts, and some have even labeled the alleged positive impacts of sports regarding social integration and mobility as a „myth”. (Spaaij, Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2015) Though there are encouraging examples which show that participating in sports activity under specific programs increased the cultural and network capital of some of the participants with disadvantaged background, and thus improved their chances for upward mobility, researchers tend to emphasize the limits of this possibility. (Spaaij 2009, Kelly 2011) Sports reinforce and maintain current hierarchies and power relations just as much as they loosen them, which means that the mechanisms of exclusion are just as much characteristic of sports as mechanisms of inclusion. (Földesi 2010) Furthermore, researches emphasize that it is not the young athletes from marginalized groups but those with white middle-class background who benefit the most from the positive impacts of sports. (Spaaij, Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2015)

It is obvious that in order for sports to exert any of the positive impacts on disadvantaged groups, and to contribute to their social integration it is necessary that organizations in charge of regular sports activities should be open towards these social groups, and that young people from low status and vulnerable social group should have access to the opportunities offered by sports clubs.

However, it has been widely demonstrated that participation in sports activity is related to social stratification; therefore, those from disadvantaged social groups tend to participate in sports activity less often. (Donnelly 1996) According to researches conducted in various developed countries, income poverty and low parental education are connected to a lower likelihood of involvement in organized sports in sports clubs (e.g. Vandermeerschen, Vos and Scheerder 2013, Breuer 2008); consequently, those coming from lower social classes are

underrepresented in high performance competitive sports. (Coackey 1997, Eitzen and Sage 1997) This connection was also detected in Hungary a long time ago. Sports activity was most accessible in Hungary to young people with a low social status in the early phase of the communist period, and the accessibility began to decrease as early as the late sixties; by the eighties inequalities clearly began to grow in sports in Hungary. (Földesi 2010) Researches conducted in the early eighties demonstrated that the children of parents with high level of education are more likely to participate in sports (Laki-Makszin 1995a), and all the recent researches have confirmed the correlation between social status and sporting activity. (Fábri 2002, Gál 2008, Velenczei 2012, Perényi 2013)

Sports and sports clubs in Hungary

The issue of sports has been an outstanding and politically relevant topic in Hungary over the past decades. Achievement at international sports competitions have always been connected to the questions of national identity and national “glory” (Houlihan 2000) also in Hungary, and before 1990 achievement in the international sports arena was also used to justify the superiority of communist society in a bipolar world. (Földesi 2000) During that period not only competitive sports were politically important; sports activity – under the aegis of ‘mass sports’ which was a government idea emulating an already existing Soviet pattern – was connected, especially in the 1950’s, with work performance and with the defense of the Socialist homeland, and in turn with the requirement to develop the necessary moral and physical condition to implement those objectives. (Houlihan 2000, Tigyi 2015) Ultimately however, the focus was essentially on professional sports during the communist period, and the system of sports associations – with the major sports associations representing a given branch of industry and connected to the trade union association operating in that branch – was established with the primary goal to achieve outstanding results in sports competitions. Many of the sports clubs established at that time still play an important role in sports in Hungary.

Less attention was paid to sports after the political and economic transformation in 1990, but the close connection between professional sports and national identity remained. Over the past decade however, government policy has taken more interest in sports, which has resulted the allocation of more financial resources to some branches in sports.

This interest, again, has focused on professional sports, but at the same time, the Sport XXI. National Sports Strategy, to which I have already alluded in the introduction, regards it as a fact that sports can be a practical device to promote the inclusion of social disadvantaged groups and to improve social cohesion; this is why the National Sports Strategy paid particular attention to physical education, to school sports and to leisure time sports as well.

The participation of Hungarian population in sports activity can be considered as average by European standard. If we look at the two last Eurobarometer

surveys, we can see that Hungarians became significantly more active (15pp increase in 2013 compared to 2009), but their activity is still a little below the European average (38% at least once a week compared to the 41% of the Europeans in average). However, their participation in sport clubs is among the lowest with 5% in the European Union. (European Commission 2014)

According to the Hungarian Youth Research 2016 36% of the age group between 15 and 29 was involved in sports activities outside school, which has seemed to be a stable figure over the past years. The percentage of those involved in competitive sports activity shows a significant decline with 5% in 2016 compared to 17% in 2000. (Székely and Szabó 2017)

Sports clubs provide the framework for professional sports as well as recreational sports. In general, we can state that the number of sports clubs as well as membership in sports clubs have decreased since 1990, but we do not have exact figures because the central control and administration of sports was dissolved which makes sports related data difficult to access. Currently the number of sports clubs in Hungary is estimated to be around 7000, and among them there are 60-80 major sports clubs – most of them are located in the capital city of Budapest – which play a central role in training professional athletes. (Bukta 2013) The sports clubs that were established before the regime change tend to focus on professional sports while the sports clubs that were set up after 1990 provide more opportunities for recreational sports, and they usually incorporate only a few branches of sports, often some fashionable or new sports. (Bukta 2013) In case of the traditional branches of sport, the functions of competitive sports and recreational sports are not strictly separated in many of the sports clubs, especially in the children and adolescent age groups. There are some sports, which can be played only in certain professional sports oriented sports clubs, so young people interested in such sports have no other choice even if they do not want to participate in competitions.

Although sports clubs are motivated to attract more and more children, yet they still focus primarily on competitive sports and they obtain their financing to a large extent on the basis of their results achieved in sports competitions. The comparative survey of European sports clubs (SIVSCE) demonstrated that the sports clubs of post communist countries are generally more success-oriented and put a greater emphasis on the competitive side of sports and less on the social aspect. (Elmose-Østerlund et al. 2017) Among the surveyed countries the statement emphasizing the importance of the social aspect of sports (importance of „companionship and conviviality”) had the lowest degree of acceptance in Hungary, while the importance of sporting success and competition was valued the most highly in Hungary after Poland. (Elmose-Østerlund et al. 2017)

All in all, we can conclude that, in addition to educational institutions, sports clubs offer the most important framework for organized sports activity for Hungarian youth. Therefore, it is an important question to what extent these sports clubs provide spaces of social integration for young athletes, that is, how much opportunity there is for young people who have different social background to meet each other and to develop relationships with each other.

The research

My paper is based on a research we did with the students at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary as a part of their study program in sociology. The field work was conducted during the summer of 2015.

Our target group was young athletes (between 15 and 29 years) who take part in sports activities in sports clubs. The survey was conducted on a sample of 722 athletes. The geographic area of the research was the capital city of Budapest and the region around it.⁴ Our research was not representative; we relied on convenience sampling through contacting departments of various sports clubs. With respect to each department, though, our objective was to conduct a full scale survey. It was our goal that the sample should reflect the variety characteristic of the investigated population according to the types of the branches of sports as well as of the types of the sports clubs. In order to achieve this we included the traditional large clubs, the smaller sports clubs as well as some university sports clubs in the research. In the end our sample included more than 60 departments of 45 sports club in 15 major branches of sports.⁵

Though according to the Hungarian Youth Research 2016 36% of those aged 15-29 years do sports, sporting activity decreases with age, 44% of those aged 15-19 but only 29% of those aged 25-29 years do sports (Székely and Szabó 2017). This was also reflected in the composition of our sample. The youngest age group is overrepresented, as it was expected: 58% of the sample was between 15 and 19 years, and only 13% was aged 25-29.

The research covered various topics, and it focused on the motivation and attitude of young people doing sports activity. My paper contains only a part of the figures collected in our research, but they provide significant contribution to the role of sports as well as of sports clubs played in social inclusion in Hungary.

Inclusivity or homogeneity of the sports clubs regarding socio-economic background

When we were planning the research, we assumed that we would interview, for the most part, athletes who regularly take part in competitions, and that the young athletes in the established sports clubs would come from families with higher than average income and higher than average educational level in comparison to the national average. We also made the assumption that we would find differences among the various branches of sports in that those coming from relatively low status families would participate in those branches of sports that require less equipment and infrastructure.

⁴ It should be noted that this area is the most advanced economically and is one of the wealthiest in Hungary. Budapest has the 38% of the total GDP of Hungary and 20% of the total population; the net income is 131% of the average of the country and the per capita GDP 205% of the average of the country (Data of the Hungarian Statistical Office, 2016 https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_eves_6_3). This will be important with respect to the socio-demographic composition of the sample.

⁵ The branches examined were: american football, athletics, basketball, boxing, fencing, football, handball, judo, karate, kayak-canoe, rowing, swimming, volleyball, water polo and wrestling.

The results of our research clearly verified our hypothesis regarding the role of competition in the sports clubs. We found that most of the athletes in the sport clubs are involved in competitive sports. So the clubs are not open towards of those who would like to make sport „only” for fun or recreation. Three-quarter of the athletes regularly take part in sports competitions, they attend all the important competitions. Another 19% takes part „sometimes” in competitions or already quitted taking part in it. This figure demonstrates that by the time they reach this age only those remain who are willing to take up the lifestyle required by high performance sports activity; only 6% said they were never competing at all.

The results of our research also verified our hypothesis regarding the role of the family background in sports. Social status of the athletes was measured by two components: educational level of the parents and subjective perception of material conditions. The educational level of the parents of the young athletes is extremely high compared to the Hungarian national average; two thirds of the mothers and more than half of the fathers attended higher education. The national average is much lower for the parents of the same age group (15-29): 14 and 13% respectively. Both parents had a higher education degree in case of almost half of the athletes (47%), while at least one of the parents had a higher education degree in case of three-quarter of the athletes.

There is similarly a huge difference with respect to the personal judgment of the material status⁶ of the family: almost half (47%) of the young athletes responded that they live in a household “without any financial problems”, while only 7% claimed this nationwide. Consequently, the situation proved to be just the reverse with respect to the subjective perception of material condition as unsatisfactory; 42% nationwide, while only 10% in our sports sample claimed that their household can “just make ends meet” or has difficulties⁷. The Hungarian Youth Research also showed that there is a strong connection between subjective material status and sports activity: 57% of those who live without any financial problems regularly do physical activity, while only 18% of those who have difficulties in making ends meet or live in deprivation. (Székely-Szabó 2017)

These results clearly demonstrate that young people with disadvantageous social background (in terms of perceived material condition and parental education) are mostly excluded from the benefits of organized sports. Consequently, the sports clubs of the Budapest region are not inclusive in this aspect. This is in stark contrast with what Hungarian sports clubs stated in the SIVSCE research: in that research Hungary was the country where the level of agreement was the highest with the statement that sports clubs make efforts in order to include disadvantaged individuals. (Elmose-Østerlund et al. 2017)

⁶ The subjective perception of material conditions was measured (in our research as well as in the Hungarian Youth Research) with the following scale (in parenthesis the proportion of the category in our sample): „we live without any financial problems (47%) / with economizing, we can make ends meet fairly easily (41%) / we can just make ends meet (8%) / we spend our money every month, we have difficulties making ends meet (1%) / we live in deprivation (1%)”.

⁷ The fact that we conducted our research in the economically most advanced region of Hungary partly accounts for the large difference with respect to subjective material status and educational level. These differences would have been smaller if we had access to the regional comparative data for the age group 15-29.

However, the different branches of sport may be not equally exclusive. It has been discussed in sports sociology for a long time, and both international (Lüschen 1969, Yiannakis 1975) and Hungarian researches (Velenczei 2012) have demonstrated the fact that the social base of the various sports can be significantly different, which means that the various branches of sports are open towards young people coming from low income and low education families to varying degrees. It is important to stress that this fact not only implies that the youth from lower classes prefer those branches of sports which require less sports equipment and infrastructure, but that the various branches of sports have also different subcultures. So the various branches differ not only with respect to how expensive they are, but also with respect to their particular traditions or to their customs regarding physical proximity among athletes. (Bourdieu 2002) Both international and Hungarian researches often refer to boxing as the branch of sports which is particularly preferred by young people from lower classes. (Eitzen and Sage 1997, Bodnár 2015)

We detected, in agreement the above mentioned results, extremely large differences among the branches of sports investigated in our research with respect to the educational level of the parents.⁸ We found, that while in the case of fencing and water polo the high education status of the parents is characteristic, the parents of young people involved especially in boxing, but also in football and wrestling have dominantly lower educational level. Differences are particularly significant: in case of three-quarters of boxers (but also half of football players and 41% of the wrestlers) none of the parents had a higher education degree, while this holds only for 11% of the fencers and 7% of the water polo players. It was among the young fencers, who practice a traditionally elite kind of sports, that we found the highest proportion for both parents having at least a college degree (71%), while there was no such a family among boxers.

With respect to the perception of material status those playing water polo are the highest (65% living without any financial problems), while those involved in boxing, hand ball and football are the lowest, with around one-third of them saying living without any financial problems.

We can regard, on the basis of these two variables, those branches of sports more inclusive where there is a greater proportion of young people whose parents have relatively low level of education or who live in households with a low income as defined by their own standard. It follows also from our data that water polo and fencing are the most exclusive sports, while boxing, football, wrestling and partly handball appear to be the most inclusive to those from the lower classes. The detected differences are partly in agreement with the results of earlier Hungarian and international researches. In Hungary sports sociologist Attila Velenczei (2012), on the basis of his own research which was conducted

⁸ Due to the fact that the number of cases were quite low in some branches of sports that we investigated (the number of respondents ranged between 20 and 50 in most of the branches of sports from among the 15 analyzed branches of sports) and that the impacts of the sports clubs and the sports branches could not be separated properly in our research, our statements referring to the differences among branches of sports should be regarded as explorative, and require further research, though they are in agreement with the figures of similar Hungarian and international researches.

among young athletes, elaborated a pyramid, which showed the relationship between kinds of sport and social status.

He found that fencers, water polo players and pentatlonists (who were not investigated in our research) have the highest social status, while young athletes from lower status families can be more likely found among wrestlers, handball players, and mostly among boxers. Our research also supports that these differences actually exist today.

Our results are partly in agreement with the statement made by Bourdieu (2002) that higher status groups prefer those branches of sports which require less physical contact. Our research clearly demonstrated this in case of the combat sports (boxing, wrestling, judo and fencing). On the other hand, the elite status of water polo shows that the factors underlying the differences with respect to the social status of various sports are a lot more complex, and physical contact is only one of the factors.

To sum up these results of our research, we can say that a young person who wants to do some kind of sports in a sports club, needs a family with stable financial situation, parents with high level of education and willingness to take up a life style required for competitive sports. This is a very strong selection. Moreover, a traditional family attachment to sports also helps a lot. In one out of four cases the parent used to do the same kind of sports actively as their children now, and for two-thirds of the young athletes at least one of the parents does or did sports in a sports club. It should be noted that those are more likely to agree with the proposition “my children will be doing sports as well” whose parents also used to do sports. This reinforces that the role of family traditions in sport is very strong in Hungary.

The gender aspect of sports in the sports clubs

Researches investigating the relation between sports and social inequalities in the context of social integration frequently highlight the gender aspect of inequalities. They stress that sports activity operates in a patriarchal, masculine and heteronormative framework. (Theberge 2000, Dunning 2002) This framework not only discourages young women to participate in sports but partly justifies why there is less attention and resource allocated for female sports than for male sports. (Spaaij, Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2015) These inequalities in sports, in spite of the growing participation of women, endure. (Hargreaves 1994) Researches have demonstrated that the acceptance of traditional gender roles is particularly strong in Hungary in comparison to other European countries. (see Pongrácz and S. Molnár 2011, Gregor 2016) Therefore, it is not surprising that young women take part in sports to a much less degree than young men. According to the Hungarian Youth Research 2016 more men do sports than women: 42% of men, but only 30% of women in the age group 15-29 do sports outside school. (Székely and Szabó 2017) This is also reflected in the composition of our sample with about two-thirds men and one third women found in the departments involved.

Societies tend to regard the world of sports as masculine, and competitiveness is stereotypically considered a male quality. It was interesting to investigate, how the attitude of young female athletes diverge from that of young male athletes with respect to competition, orientation to victory, and rule following. Though the great majority of the young athletes interviewed in our research took side in favor of fairness and rule following in sports, statistically significant differences could be detected. While more than four-fifth of women believe that the observation of rules is important in sport under all circumstances, only two-thirds of the men held this view. Only 59% of the men, whereas 71% of the women agreed with the statement that fairness is more important than victory, and almost a third of the men (while only 20% of the women) regarded faults as permissible for the sake of victory. It can be concluded that male athletes are more victory-oriented and respect the rules less than female athletes.

Interpersonal relations

The spatial dimension of inclusion in sports clubs has been discussed so far. In the following I will present some of our research results that are connected to the relational dimension of social inclusion. Joint activity establishes close interpersonal relations. If young athletes with diverging background did sports together in sports clubs, then these relations could enhance integration also outside of the area of sports. Several researches have demonstrated that sports have a favorable impact on social relations and sports establish a dense social network. The relationship between sports and social networking is also important because inequality in having access to organized forms of sports is not merely a consequence of social inequality, but it also reinforces the reproduction of social inequality.

We expected that the relational network of young athletes active in sports clubs is determined by sports. We assumed as part of this hypothesis that these young athletes have more than average friends thanks to the relations developed through sports activity and that the majority of their friends are also athletes. We also made the assumption that this correlation would hold for competitive athletes more, than for the others because they spend a lot more time with their fellow athletes; and it would hold more for team sports than for individual sports. We expected such correlation because the development and strengthening of cooperative abilities and the sense of belonging are frequently discussed in sport sociology among the positive socialization effects of team sports. (Bíró 2004) Our research confirmed our hypothesis except for the assumption concerning team sports.

We compared the number of friends in the age group between 18 and 29 with a national representative survey⁹. Compared to this national survey, the athletes in our research had twice as many friends in average (9.57 versus 4.93) and only less than a quarter of them claimed to have fewer than five friends. In

⁹ The nationwide data are from the research „Processes of Integration and Desintegration in the Hungarian Society” (OTKA K108836), 2015.

the national survey however three-quarter of the respondents had fewer than five friends. Among the athletes, men typically reported having more friends than women, and young athletes reported having more friends than older athletes, which is in agreement with the general trends detected in researches on friendship. (Albert and Dávid 2007) However, it is not true in general that those participating in team sports have more friends than individual athletes. The impact of the branches of sports was statistically significant only among the youngest age group (aged 15-18); judo and water polo players have the most friends in this age group. In the other age groups the impact of the branches of sports was not significant.

The personal network of those active in sports competitions is more defined by sports, while it is much less formative for those who are not regularly competing. The majority of the friends of those competing regularly are also athletes: this is the case for 58% of them, and only 13% said that athletes make up less than the half of their friends. More than the half of those competing regularly said that they spend their free time also with people they know from sports. The more successful an athlete is, the more typical it is, that the greater part of his or her social network is made up by fellow athletes. Friends have a definite role in motivating athletes; 72% of the athletes claimed that their friends and their company at the sports club play a great role in their participating in sports.

It is an important question from the viewpoint of social integration if the personal connections acquired through sports can contribute to the success of the young athletes in the long run, also outside their sports activity. The young athletes that we interviewed were aware that social networking had great significance: more than 80% of the athletes agree (4 or 5 on a 5-grade scale) that “I will be able to take advantages of the contacts I developed through sports also in the future”; the more successful an athlete is the more he or she is convinced of this. The correlation between views and being successful is statistically significant. Water polo players, who have the most privileged social background in our sample, are the ones who diverge most from the average of the whole sample (4.23 on a five-grade-scale); they agree with the statement that they will be able to take advantages of their sports network also in the future to a significantly greater degree (4.45). There is a small but significant difference between men and women in this respect; men agree with this statement to a slightly greater degree.

It should be added that the great majority of athletes classified their relation with their fellow athletes as well as with their trainers as good. The mean on a five-grade scale (1 meaning very bad and 5 meaning very good) is 4.5 for those fellow athletes, who are competing, 4.2 for those not competing, and 4.4 for the trainers. We can see that young athletes active in sports clubs have developed, by the time they reach the age group we investigated, an extensive social network through sports, which they consider positive and useful.

Skills and competences achieved through sport

As regards the functional dimension of inclusion, we investigated what negative or positive impact of sports the athletes perceive on their personality and their school performance. When we posed open questions about how they perceive the positive or negative impacts of sports, a lot more respondents mentioned positive impacts than negative. While only half of the sample was able to mention “something in which sports had a negative impact on me”, almost all of them (96%) could mention at least one positive impact on sports. By far perseverance and self-confidence were mentioned the most frequently among the positive impacts exerted by sports on their personality.

The majority agreed with the statement that “if I am successful in sports, I will also be successful in my life”. Boxers agreed with this statement to a significantly higher than average degree. (4.11 compared to the 3.68 average on a five-grade scale)

Some researches claim that the school performance of students who regularly do physical exercise is generally better than that of those who do not; on the other hand, regular participation in sports competitions does not necessarily impact school performance negatively (Pikó 2005, Laki and Makszin 1995b), but other researches disagree or find the evidence insufficient to support such a claim. (Bailey 2005) In our research we did not investigate the actual school performance of the athletes (83% of the respondents studied in secondary or higher education); we only requested them to position their study performance in comparison to the average of their environment. One-fifth of the young athletes classified their study performance as much better than the average, and another two-fifths classified their performance as better than average; only 6% considered their performance as worse than average. Though there seems to be a correlation between school performance and the branches of sports, this connection is actually partly due to the impact of the educational level of parents; one quarter of the young athletes with both parents having a higher education degree considered their performance much higher than average, while only one-tenth of those with none of the parents having a higher education degree consider it the same way.

It should be noted that the trainers from the various branches of sports seem to be aware of these differences and they adjust their activity accordingly; for instance, in case of wrestlers and boxers – who tend to have a disadvantaged family background – trainers pay more attention to how their athletes perform at school, a significantly higher proportion of athletes active in these sports stated that their trainers follow closely how they study at school.

Forty percent of the athletes considered sports as having positive impact on their study performance, and only 15% claimed that sports had a negative influence. Ultimately, a relative majority consider study performance more important than sports activity; for almost the half of the respondents their studies are more important than sports, and sports activity is more important only

for less than a third. Importance of sports, not surprisingly, significantly grows with having success in sports. Although the connection between the importance of sports and the branches of sports is statistically not significant, it is worth mentioning that a considerably high proportion among boxers (60%) stated that sports activity is more important than school. We can make the cautious assumption that boxers, because of their less favorable social background and their rather poor school performance, hope to achieve a “breakthrough” in their life through sports.

The results have demonstrated that, while researchers are somewhat sceptic about the positive impact of sports on personality as well as about the positive impacts on study skills and school performance, athletes themselves tend to agree with the general views of the public in both aspects and believe in the positive influence of sports. This attitude may partially be explained by the fact that the respondents in our research were at least 15 years old, and they had been participating in sports for a long time, most of them competing regularly. It is conceivable that, by the age of 15, those already quit their activity in sports clubs whose expectations for sports achievement had not been met or had experienced the negative impacts of sports, and so those remained active who had largely positive experience in sports.

The past two sections above have shown that young athletes active in sports clubs consider their sports activity as essentially positive from the aspect from their social relations as well as from the impact of sports on their personality.

Conclusion

As I pointed out, the aim of my paper was to address two questions in relation to the role played by sports clubs in influencing social integration. It was our assumption that sports clubs can play a positive role in promoting social integration only if 1) they are inclusive, that is, they offer access to sports activity also to young people with a disadvantaged background, and 2) they promote capacity building, that is, young athletes can acquire those skills and abilities through their involvement in the sports activity and in the life of the sports clubs that will facilitate their becoming successful in other areas of social life as well. This also implies that they can develop those personality traits as well the networks that will contribute to a successful life career.

Consequently, the first research question was *how inclusive sports clubs are*. With respect to this question I investigated the aspects of socio-economic status and gender in connection with the composition of youth in sports clubs. As regards aspects of gender, our research detected, similarly to previous researches (Székely and Szabó 2017), that women are still underrepresented in sports. As regards socio-economic status, we detected that the composition of young athletes in the age group 15-29 is significantly different from that of the entire age group in Hungary with respect to the educational level of the parents and with respect to their subjectively perceived material condition. The educational level of their

parents is particularly high, and these young athletes evaluate the material status of their family much higher than the Hungarian average. Therefore, our figures show that the sports clubs we investigated are not inclusive in the sense that those coming from families with lower than middle-class material status and educational level have very limited access to the sports activities offered by these sports clubs. It should be noted that we – similarly to earlier researches – detected important differences among the various branches of sports with respect to their inclusive character.

The second question of our research was how the supposed positive impacts of sports (skills, abilities, personal development, network building) appear *in the perception of the youth in sports clubs*, that is how they themselves view the influence of sports on their life. What we can conclude is that the young athletes themselves definitely view the influence of sports positively. It is evident in the perception of the young athletes from the sports departments that we investigated that sports have a positive impact; the positive influence of sports on their personality was particularly often mentioned, and ‘perseverance’ was mentioned most frequently as the personality trait developed and enhanced by sports. These young athletes seem to have considerably more, about twice as many friends as the national average in their age group. The social relations of athletes regularly participating in competitions are formatively defined by sports; most of them have their fellow athletes as their friends, and they tend to spend their leisure time with friends from sports clubs. They are also aware of the importance of these relations, for most of them believe that their sports network will be beneficial and useful for them in the rest of their lives. They are convinced that sports activity is more helpful than harmful for their school performance, and the majority of them believes that there is a connection between having success in sports and being successful in life. This indicates that the reality of sports as positively promoting social integration appears tangible for those young athletes active in sports; sports activity, according to their interpretation, facilitates their becoming successful and competent adults in society later in their life. It should be emphasized that we are discussing here mainly *attitudes* regarding sports and the impacts of sports, but I would argue that these positive attitudes have the power to engender actions that can in fact contribute to sports playing a positive role in social integration.

All of this indicates that sports have *the potential* to be regarded as a means to combat social exclusion. The problem, however, is that young people marginalized by social and economic barriers do not have access to sports: we can find, most of the time, young athletes from high-education middle class families – or from families with an even higher social status – in sports clubs in the Budapest and in the region around the capital of Hungary.

The sports clubs that we investigated, contrary to their declared aims (Elmose-Østerlund et al. 2017), are not inclusive at all, and are not open to young people with low economic status and parents with low educational level. We can

draw the inference, on the basis of the social composition of the young athletes active in sports clubs, that sports clubs do not seem to have introduced (or not to sufficient extent) any special measures that would facilitate the participation of disadvantaged youth in sports activity. Yet it would be very important to facilitate it because sports activity could promote social integration only if sports provided a social space where people from different social background interact and communicate with each other and they can act together on the basis of their shared interest and commitment (Witoszynskyj and Moser 2010), and they can experience their belonging to a common group.

However, as indicated by the results of our research, mainly those living in favorable conditions can take advantage of the positive impact of sports. Consequently, we can confirm the results of earlier researches which showed that sports rather tend to reinforce the position of privileged social groups (see e.g. Spaaij, Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2015 or Földesi 2010), and therefore, contribute more to maintaining and reproducing than to reducing inequality and segregation.

The result of our research provided answers to certain questions and left open others, while raised also new questions. Future research should expand to the entire country since Budapest and the area around the capital differs from the rest of Hungary in several respects. Further research should also address the other aspects of inclusion; primarily the question of how organized sports could promote the social integration of young people in the Roma minority. We did not collect data about Roma youth in our research, but various data indicate that there are great differences among various branches of sports in this respect. Consequently, a detailed investigation of certain branches of sports (particularly boxing) or the investigation of certain clubs or departments of clubs in a case-study would be required. It should also be noted that when investigating the relation between sports and inclusion/exclusion, researches applying qualitative and mixed methods would be required in order to explore deeper connections and more differentiated personal experience. Since the role of trainers and coaches is formative in attracting and keeping disadvantaged young people in sports activities, some research focusing on trainers would provide important lessons in this field.

Our research has demonstrated that sports activity in sports clubs offers important possibilities from the standpoint of social integration. Further sports sociology researches can explore more deeply the potentials inherent promoting integration through sports.

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